

A Persistent Lack of Erotic Imagination

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There was a warm, sweet weight against her torso, breathing in harmony with her own sleep-drugged exhalations. The faint strains of a bandoleón accompanied a soft, plaintive tenor and the opening lyrics of *El Día Que Me Quiera* filled her dream. “*Acaricia mi ensueño el suave murmullo de tu suspirar*”—She felt the weight against her stir and her own body tense in readiness for the dance. There was a click as the front door to the apartment closed and her husband entered the room. She opened her eyes and carefully shifted the still-sleeping baby who had collapsed over her body. It was time to get dressed and visit the ritual bath.

She was a walking oxymoron, marching down the narrow streets of the old Jewish quarter in the Marais looking for the *Mikvah*, in a silver leather mini-skirt, her hair hanging down below the hem to touch the tops of her thigh-high boots. A young Orthodox teenager, his pale face framed by two long *payas*, prematurely stooped by years of study and lack of physical activity, walked by on the opposite pavement, accompanied by his grandfather, the two of them clad in unseasonable black suits and tall hats, their Eastern-European attire accentuating the other-worldliness of this Parisian *quartier*. The boy stopped in his tracks and gaped, his jaw hanging. His grandfather smacked him soundly across the side

of his head and the two scuttled down the street, heads lowered.

The old woman at the *Mikvah* showed her inside, head shaking, mouth compressed in disapproval. The air was warm and steamy, slightly rank, silent and claustrophobic. The old woman told her to disrobe, her head slightly averted so as to avoid invading the stranger's modesty or lack thereof. When it came the time to pluck from her body any persistently clinging hairs so as to not contaminate the purity of the ritual bath, the old woman clucked and muttered in disgust and shook her head in ever increasing condemnation. She repeated the words of the *brochah*, slowly as if instructing someone slow or stranger to the prayer, then waited for her to immerse herself three times and emerge, purified of the contaminating blood of her last menses, and ready for sexual union with her husband.

She walked out into the street, busier now as the afternoon drew to a close. Within the space of a short block, she passed a shop that seemed to be filled with Arabs, or more likely, North African Jews. The Arabs lived in Clichy or Saint Denis, another world, however close. Here, as in Israel, enemies for five thousand years, the descendants of Abraham still chose to live in simmering proximity. At that time the gay culture had only just begun to infiltrate; a slow trickle, attracted by the beautiful architecture, the suspension of time, and the feeling of being in another world.

She had managed to avoid visiting the *Mikvah* for a couple of months. She had learned that her husband's insistence on strict observance of the laws of *Kashrut*, or keeping a Kosher home, and the laws of ritual cleansing, could work to her advantage. By avoiding the ritual bath, she could keep her husband away from her bed, and his demeaning remarks about her body, which did not please him.

For the last two months she had been dancing in a night club in Montparnasse; the week of daily rehearsals as she learned the show, then the nightly engagements that ended at two AM, gave her plenty of reasons to excuse herself on the grounds of too little time. Then she had a sixteen-month-old infant to occupy her days. All in all, she slept an average of three hours each night, and then hoped to grasp another hour in the afternoon if and when the little girl took a nap. In Montparnasse, no one disapproved of her body. No one knew she visited a *Mikvah*, or abided by the laws of Orthodox Judaism. They would have been astounded to hear of it. The Orthodox community was ignorant of her profession as a dancer, but nothing about her would have astounded them. She was so obviously beyond the pale. Because this was the nineteen sixties she was safe from stoning, and no one openly questioned the judgment of the husband who did not object to her scandalous career. His alleged mathematical genius clothed him in the whitewash of eccentricity.

The *Mikvah* and the nightclub created a cognitive dissonance, an unparalleled cultural schizophrenia. This resonated in comparable harmony with the near-schizophrenia brought on by lack of sleep and the conflicting opinions of, on one hand, a critical and disparaging husband and on the other, the generous approval of her fellow-artists; dancers, transvestites and strippers who told her she was beautiful. A depressed and dowdy frump by day, a leggy, feather-and-sequined fantasy by night. A little more sleep to separate the roles would have saved her from the tight-rope of exhaustion on which she wobbled.

Stepping out into the fading afternoon, she exited the ritual baths and made her way down the narrow streets to the Blvd. Raspail. If she walked instead of taking the Metro, she could horde an additional forty five minutes of blessed solitude. She wove her way through the pressing pedestrians, the sellers of burnt-sugar-coated nuts, and the insistent vendors offering bargains outside the BHV, crossed over near the metro St. Paul and continued towards the Pont Marie. From there she could continue on foot along the *quais* to the Jardins de Plants and make her way through the gardens and out the far gate to the Blvd de l'Hôpital, near Austerlitz. Then it was a short walk to the Blvd. St Marcel where they rented rooms in the apartment of a Parisian couple, friends of her husband.

Somewhere between the far side of Raspail and Pont Marie she wavered, disoriented. It was as if she had never been down this narrow street before. Shop windows glinted in the afternoon light, bounced back her own reflection, patterned with fabrics and shapes from the interior displays, creating a collage of woman and precious stones and oriental weave. She stopped, dizzy, overcome by the recent warmth of the baths, sleep deprivation and sensory overload. For a moment she thought that she was lost, then realized that she was on the far side of the Pont Louis Philippe, downriver from Pont Marie. At her back stretched a slow cobbled rise of shallow steps in soft grey stone. To the right a famous restaurant, Julien, then the cool shadowed offices and a little store belonging to the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jerusalem who sold candles and honey, soaps and elixirs of herbs prepared by the members of their sect. On the other side, at the top of the stairs, the huge Gothic Cathedral of St. Gervais, clock tower soaring over gargoyles and stone arches, its hands ever still, fixed in time and an eternity of frozen faith. But the ancient stone, the mute shadows and the surprising silence—it was as if the soft air created a buffer between this ancient place of worship and the busy circulation of traffic passing the bridge—all this soothed her senses and slowed her heart. She had an overwhelming urge to enter the cathedral and sit in darkness for a moment, just a moment.

She climbed the stairs leading up to the huge doors, bypassing a seated clochard who entreated in cheerful inebriation for a gesture of charity. He held out a filthy cloth cap for a handout, wavered crazily for a moment, and then fell onto his side, snoring. Feeling that she was in danger of joining him, she pushed passed the doors and entered the stone interior. High sweet voices rose in plainsong, then a pure crystal soprano, as one of the nuns sent her voice soaring above the deeper male intonations of evening mass. She had entered at the rear of the cathedral and the congregation was hidden by the enormous altar. The voices appeared to float in emptiness, their owners invisible. To her right, against the side wall loomed a crucifix, the Christ, carved in rich dark wood was larger than life, huge, his muscled arms outstretched, head gently hanging to one side as if engaged in a silent Zorba-dance. To the rear, in the apse, resided the Virgin Mother, her place announcing to the world that she was behind it all; the support and genesis of deity, priesthood and congregation. Her abode beckoned, radiating peace and enticing one to enter and sit for a while. This place was different from the rest of the cold, cavernous cathedral; smaller, more intimate and filled with floating jewel tones of light that filtered down through the stained-glass windows. The luminous colors skittered and skimmed over the walls and the floor and caressed the face of the softly smiling mother, who looked down on the various women gathered here, away from the main congregation. The women sat in chairs or kneeled, supported on low wooden

prayer stools, all of them murmuring with unconcealed fervor, eyes screwed tight shut. In the front, right at the feet of the statue of the Mother, a young nun kneeled on the bare carpet. She let out a soft shuddering sigh and slowly bowed over. Her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs, and her head hung almost to her knees. Behind her, another woman, clothed in black, wept into her handkerchief. Then another. And another. Within minutes as many as seven women were shaking in silent grief; a Greek chorus of osmotic mourning, tears permeating the thin psychic membrane that both separated them and glued them together. Suddenly, the little nun, overcome, rose up on her knees and prostrated herself before the Virgin, sinking down in a movement both supplicant and balletic. Face down, forehead pressed to the carpet, arms outstretched at her sides, she presented to the tired Jewish woman a tempting posture of acceptable repose. She slid from her chair to the floor, mimicking the movements of the nun, stretched out on her stomach and closed her eyes.

She sank down and down. A dragonfly of sleep skimmed the waters of her consciousness, and then darted over a lake of dreams. The dragonfly became a tsunami and the wave rolled up from her solar plexus and lifted her; she hung suspended between worlds.

She is walking between Peter and Richild, two dancers from her spiritual family. They are approaching a church that

she suddenly realizes she has visited countless times in Dreamtime. They are in a South American country. Here, every Sunday the entire congregation of the pueblo, in Peruvian dress, sing and dance in the open square outside the walls of the church. The circling movements of the dance swirl the colors of their raiment into a rainbow vortex that whips around the plaza then passes behind the church like the tail of a comet. The singing voices crescendo and the dance spins and swoops and expands. Bursting its bounds, the congregation overflows into the narrow, cobbled streets and pours downwards, a human stream.

She floats upwards, sucked along in their wake, hovering over a streaming panorama of bodegas and buildings and countless cathedrals of remarkable beauty. The people moving through the streets below are gazing around them too, marveling at the structures and exclaiming in hushed whispers that they had never noticed them before. It is as if what was hidden is now revealed.

Suddenly she finds herself alone in a glade of trees, stripped winter-bare. She is still viewing the land from high, gazing downwards through bleached branches that eerily imitate the antlers of a herd of deer that run through the silent snow, weaving their way through the tree trunks. The mirrored forms of branches and antlers stream in parallel through the landscape, creating a breathless illusion of speed. Her perception

shifts and she feels a dropping in her belly, and finds herself standing now, in the midst of the forest. The snow glitters like crushed diamonds and dips away into blue shadows. She turns a slow circle.

In the fork between branch and trunk of a shining silver tree, is the face of Christ, sculpted in soft brown wood. Feathery twigs sprouting tender green buds form his crown of thorns. In the center of his forehead, at his Buddha third eye is a gleaming gold Mogen David, or Star of David, glinting in the sunlight. Gilded needles stream from the shining star and pierce her forehead, where pressure from the carpet on which she lies, in the apse of St. Gervais, cause an explosion of light inside her cranium.

The events of the next week, if not remarkable enough to warrant the term miraculous, were nonetheless surprising. Firstly, her baby who up until now, at the age of sixteen months had stubbornly refused to stand up, where most children of her age were already walking was goaded into action. A solemn, intent child, she steadfastly sat on her padded bottom and refused to budge.

The family whose space they shared was called Brown. The husband, an Englishman, had a guitar. He spent a fair amount of time busking for change in the metros and streets. His French wife, Annie, a tall, attractive girl with shining brown

hair, accompanied him on occasion and sang "*Milord*" for American tourists in cafes on the left bank. She walked with a bounce, long-legged and liberated, spoke English with an American twang, and in a fit of hip wit, named their little girl Georgia.

The apartment consisted of one long corridor, leading to the bedrooms on one side, the bathroom and kitchen on the other. The children's' bedroom lay between those of the two adults. For the first few weeks of their stay, the two little girls were put down together for an afternoon nap, affording her a blessed hour or more of sleep. Then sweet Georgia Brown took to climbing out of her bed and tormenting the younger girl, frequently bashing her over the head with the nearest toy and running away, squealing in triumph. In the space of one afternoon the formally passive victim clambered up from her diapered bottom onto unsteady feet, took her first tentative steps, and by supper time was running after her nemesis.

The triumph of the event was sadly diminished when Georgia's mother insisted that from this time forward, Georgia needed to nap undisturbed. She was to take her daughter into her own room in the afternoons. This heralded the death of any hoped-for rest. At the end of three months she was practically catatonic with lack of sleep.

A few days after the incident in St. Gervais the baby decided to resist a nap with every fiber of her being. Animated and relentless she wanted to practice her newfound walking skills back and forth over her mother's body. Her mother relinquished all hope of rest. She dressed the baby and put her in her stroller. The movement would lull the child to sleep and her mother could eventually sit quietly somewhere, immobile. Pushing the stroller, practically sleepwalking herself, she entered the huge iron gates of the Jardin de Plants at Austerlitz. To the right were the low, damp walls surrounding the Zoo. Several Arab youths were tormenting the moth-eaten bears, throwing stones into their miserable habitat. Winter and summer the enclosure remained uniformly bleak; no vegetation relieved the dark, damp stone and the shallow, water-filled pit in the center was dank and murky. The bears looked as catatonic as the sleepy mother, their only purpose in life to provide an outlet for the frustration and rage of the Arabs, themselves at the bottom of the racial food chain in France. For once, black people did not occupy the place of the lowest of the low. Everyone, it seemed, needed some being, poorer and weaker to despise.

"Stop it." She screamed. "Arretez!"

The boys glanced at her and laughed.

She walked faster, unable to look. Right across the gardens and out the other side, near Jussieu. Across the street the Moroccan tea room and Hammam belonging to the mosque lined the sidewalk with elegant white walls. Like the Mikvah, the Hammam reserved separate days for men and women. She had gone once, fascinated by the communal atmosphere, unlike the Mikvah which one visited alone. She had wandered through a labyrinth of echoing space; the walls and floors of sweating tiles slippery to the touch. Clouds of steam swirled and shifted around women of all ages, chatting, gossiping, washing each other's hair and rubbing each other down with salt and oils and unguents, hennaed hands stroking soft skin with casual, almost impersonal sensuality.

She pushed the baby down the side street flanking the Hammam and found herself at the entrance to the mosque. At the open doors stood a man in pristine white djabbala and sandals.

"Come" he invited in soft French. "Guided view of sacred mosque. Come, lady."

A few tourists stopped and joined them. The women were instructed to cover their heads and all were admonished to maintain a respectful silence. Together they entered the beautiful carved doors and followed their guide, who herded them with the slightly impatient but solicitous concern of a

school teacher, on into the peaceful courtyard. The only sound was the intermittent plop and splash of the central fountain. A fig tree perfumed the air with swooning, sticky sweetness. All around were alabaster walls covered in the exquisite curving, flowing letters of timeless script.

“This ancient language,” boasted their proud guide, “has not changed in four thousand years. Not a letter. Not a word!”

What a strange thing to be proud of, she thought. He talked knowledgably and incessantly. He continued to extol the sophistication and erudition of Islam where the very beauty and aestheticism of the surroundings would have been proof enough.

She was struck by the resemblance to certain male members of her own race; the smug, paternalistic feudal benevolence, the professed acceptance of other belief-systems that they hastened to interject into any discussion of their own, feeling righteous and open-minded, convinced by their very tolerance of their own innate superiority.

She gazed around the place of worship, doing her best to block out the intrusive talk. Why is it, she wondered, that when men entered holy places, God went into hiding. She excused herself from the group and exited the mosque.

She pushed the baby out into the warmth of the day and crossed over into the gardens once more. She walked by the stone fountain where lions spewed water into the shallow bowl below, glinting over a bed of scattered coins, each one offered with whispered secret wishes by passers by. Just another place of hopeful prayer.

(In Montparnasse the black-eyed stripper pressed her fingers to the picture of her patron saint, touched each sequined- covered nipple, crossed herself and spat, whispered “*merde*” before strutting on stage behind a huge blue feathered fan.)

In the garden, above the lion fountain was a towering Cedar of Lebanon, its branches culminating in an immense dark parasol high above, its mighty trunk encircled by a curved wooden seat. She sat down in the dank shade and pressed her spine against the ancient trunk. It seemed that she could feel the silent sap flowing upwards, beneath the rough bark. It echoed in her spine and tingled in her skull and whispered to her that this tree was holy and listened to prayers too. She wished that her husband would love her.

That evening she was momentarily shocked into believing in miracles when her husband announced that they had been invited to dine with Marcel Marceau. First the baby walking, now this. It was unheard of that he include her in his

social life. Back in London, when he attended the party of his Cambridge friends, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, who were celebrating the success of their satirical review; “Beyond the Fringe” she had learned about the event months later. She was almost ready to believe that some miracle had occurred owed to the epiphany in the cathedral, or the visit to the mosque or the Mikvah or the Cedar or—or. What? Then she realized that Marceau knew her. Of course, that explained it. He had visited their home in Cape Town more than a year before. He had expressed a lively, if dubious interest in her, even then.

She remembered meeting him for the first time, on the beach at Bantry Bay. Her husband knew him already. The famous mime was small and wiry, his tanned skin in shocking contrast to his renowned white- face image. He sat on a large towel, shining with oil and fairly sparkling with Gallic animation. He had recruited a circle of admirers and held sandy court. His black eyes shone with ill concealed glee when he innocently asked everyone what they would do if they mistakenly put a too-hot potato in their mouth. All around him, aspiring mimes twisted and distorted their faces into ridiculous masks, until Marceau, with the limpid-eyed innocence of a child bemusedly asked why no-one just spat it out!

That evening, by virtue of Marceau’s previous acquaintance with her husband (who knew?) he was guest of

honor at a gathering at their home. He was gracious, accommodating, and cornering her for a moment at an open window, slyly flirtatious. He ran a finger very gently over the open neckline of her dress and whispered, "What pretty breasts, my dear!"

She gazed at him, speechless. Because M. Marceau was such a huge talent, she hesitated to point out his breach of courtesy.

The famous mime was not at a loss for words. His eyes crinkled at the corners and he leaned into her ear. "I had not supposed that you were so lacking in imagination. *Your* mask is purely erotic."

Now they were to have dinner with him in Paris, early enough to leave her time to make it to Montparnasse by ten. This time Marceau was expansive. No hint of inappropriate interest tainted his generous offer to get her an audition with a friend who was shooting his latest film in Paris. Perhaps because he knew that she was dancing in a music-hall revue, it did not occur to him to hesitate to suggest her for a part that required her to dive, nude into the Seine. Back at home, her husband assumed patriarchal authority and forbade it.

She never saw Marceau again. But on two more occasions his playful accusation was repeated by other men.

The first time, that same month, in Paris. The second, in London, some years later.

Some weeks after the dinner with Marceau, on a cold afternoon and she was home with the baby. Annie was there too in a friendly mood. Both the husbands were absent and Annie chatted with her in the kitchen and generously instructed her in the preparation of *Coq au Vin*. At around three o'clock there was a knock on the door and two men, friends of the Browns, entered bearing two bottles of *vin rouge* and a small, leather pouch. Everyone gathered in the Brown's bedroom. For once, both little girls were sleeping and the adults lay around on cushions and lazily conversed. The younger of the two men opened the leather pouch and took out a lump of hashish that he proceeded to mix with tobacco and expertly role into cigarette papers. She accepted a glass of wine, but only watched as the other three smoked. She had an ingrained belief that she must stay level and clear around the child. The other three were amused, but did not press her. By degrees the conversation drifted, and longer and longer stretches of silence invoked a kind of restless anticipation in the warm room. Outside, raindrops splattered against the windows and the light receded to a soporific grey. Annie and the younger man turned to each other and began kissing. Unwilling to intrude, she picked up her glass and made her way down the corridor to her own room. The older man, dark haired and bearded, with the impassive, sardonic cool of your

typical Parisian intellectual, sauntered casually after her. Until that moment she had not really had much exchange with him and was naively taken by surprise when he pressed her against the long windows and started to kiss her. His breath was tainted with red wine and hashish, his hair smelled unwashed. Trying to be silent, so as not to awaken the sleeping baby, she pushed against his chest and turned her face away. He stepped away from her and regarded her with derision.

“What a little bourgeoisie!” He sneered. “Have you no erotic imagination?”

He turned and stalked out. She heard the front door close behind him.

Four years later there were two more children; another little girl and an eagerly awaited son, born in Marseille. She had made the tortuous journey to London alone with the three children. The husband had traveled to America to fill a position at the University of Berkley. She was to remain in London until sent for. She had a fortuitous engagement as assistant choreographer on a television show.

Out of the blue, she was contacted by a couple; past connections from Cape Town. She had no idea how they had found her. The couple, vaguely cosmopolitan jet-setters, had never been more than casual acquaintances, but now they

greeted her like a long-lost friend and enthusiastically invited her to a lunch at a famous west-end restaurant. Still somewhat overweight from her recent confinement, she stuffed herself into her least ill-fitting outfit and joined a seriously glittering group at a long table at the roof-top venue. She had hardly settled into her allotted place before a smiling and gracious Sammy Davis Junior made his way to her side and warmly grasped her hand in both of his, kissed it gallically and introduced himself like a rank unknown. She was surrounded by international glitterati. She still had no idea why she was there. A little farther down the table sat Nathalie Delon, gorgeous, blonde and sleekly smiling, without need of her husband, Alain, to justify by his presence her irrepressible glow. At her side Francois Truffaut, darkly glowering, intent on the contents of his plate, impervious to gratuitous socialization.

She hardly noticed the contents of her own plate. She felt fat.

Somehow the group found their way to the river-front house of her hosts. She was a little tipsy from the free-flowing luncheon champagne and hardly noticed the gradual departure of all the guests, hosts included. Suddenly she was alone with the *nouvelle vague* director, not having exchanged a single word with him, and hardly understanding her role here. He made a bored and perfunctory attempt at conversation.

“And you, what do you do?”

Some contrary whim stopped her from saying she was a dancer. Instead, she tried to match the level of his ennui and replied in an offhand drawl that she was a mother, looking across the room and refusing to meet his eyes. She was beginning to comprehend the presumptuous agenda of her hosts and resentment was building.

Truffaut did not deign to indulge in further conversation. Instead he took her by the hand and silently pulled her up the stairs and into a bedroom. Wordlessly he attempted to push her back onto the bed.

“No,” she said.

“Why not?”

“My answer would not interest you.”

“Ah, *merde*,” he grunted, stupendously bored with the entire situation. “She’s *intelligent*.” He pronounced his verdict with the cold distaste reserved for a sexually transmitted disease.

“*And what complete lack of erotic imagination!*”

The fact that she failed to answer had little to do with the huge talent of M. Truffaut. Speechless, she made her way down the stairs, collected her handbag and went out in search of a taxi. She never again encountered her hosts or any of the guests of that surreal afternoon.

All the great men were right; she had no erotic imagination. She wished she were more like Lilith, Adam's first wife, the skanky one, the one with the erotic imagination that got her banned from Eden, against whose evil eye newly confined mothers wore protective talismans. Her erotic imagination was pathetic at best; her closest experience a recurring dream where she danced a tango, slow foxtrot or dreamy waltz, pressed against a warm body, floating across a vast expanse of floor in total harmony. Her dream partner's thighs would press against her own, separating them before leading her into the next long, sliding step. Her cheek was pressed against his own, his smell swelling her nostrils, his heart thumping dully against her throat. She would weep in desolation at the terrible tragedy of awakening, striving in vain to sink back into sleep, her soul stolen, held captive in the camera of the dream.